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Georgia Southern University Faculty Expert Offers Easy, Inexpensive Holiday Design Tips

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More than a season for toy-making elves and snowmen, the holidays represent a time for family and friends to celebrate strong bonds and create new memories together. Parties and gatherings — although an enjoyable, intrinsic holiday tradition — can become stressful and daunting for the host and hostess.

Georgia Southern University interior design professor Patricia Walton, ASID, IDEC, said entertaining does not have to cause undue stress. A few simple design basics can change the look of your home and hide almost any flaw.

"Interior design is more than just home décor," she explained. "Subtle changes in lighting, balance, color and proportion can change the style and ambiance of any room."

Although many people are tempted to make transformations in preparation for the holidays, Walton cautioned against starting large projects, such as reupholstering or major renovations due to time restraints and challenges in meeting deadlines. Instead, try simple, less expensive tactics that will give the illusion of a major change. Rearranging furniture is a quick, easy adjustment that can camouflage flaws and open up space for large crowds. Replacing throw pillows with larger versions in rich colors will draw a new focus. Painting one wall, or the entire space, a bold shade that brings together disjointed colors will completely transform the room's appearance.

"It's a season of twinkling lights and candles. The atmosphere can be enhanced by installing electrical dimmers yourself. It's simple and inexpensive and will give you more control over lighting to set the mood," Walton said. "I promise, dim lights and several well-placed candles can hide a multitude of sins —even dust."

Let the principles of design be your guide, Walton suggests. Consider arrangement, proportion and balance as well as contrasts of color, texture and heights to draw attention, and let your lighting set the mood. Just make sure the space isn't too dim if children or the elderly are present.

Instead of spending too much time and money on holiday décor, she suggests a host or hostess use items they already have — even if they aren't holiday related — to set the ambiance. To create a festive mood, throw a colorful quilt or blanket over the back of the sofa, bring out red linens to display with china, or cut strips of patterned fabric to spray with starch and make your own bows. Existing mirrors and chandeliers can be draped with greenery, ribbons and ornaments to complete the look.

For more than 20 years, Walton has taught in Georgia Southern's four-year, CIDA-accredited interior design program. Below she offers additional tips for creating a unique holiday presence without the stress:

- 1) **Make it special for you:** Pull out things that are important to you and your family, no matter how unusual. Arrange childhood toys or items you associate with Christmas in a group of two-to-three or more and they become a wonderful conversation starter.
- 2) **Bring out the bling:** Shiny and glittery are perfectly acceptable during the holidays. Pull out the silver and crystal and combine items of contrasting height to draw attention visually. Group sparkling red, green, gold or white items — perhaps candles or ornaments — together for emphasis and impact.
- 3) **Lighting is essential:** Use it to your advantage. Place up-lighting in greenery to create interest or use candles to accent some areas and hide others.
- 4) **Think big:** Don't waste time on every nook and cranny; focus on a few big pieces/displays to draw attention.
- 5) **Go all-natural:** Always use fresh flowers or take advantage of the beautiful free greenery outside. Holly, spruce, magnolia and fresh-cut pine serve as subtle, appropriate accents.
- 6) **Scents set the mood:** Cinnamon, nutmeg, apples and evergreen all invoke warm holiday feelings, but avoid scented candles and potpourri that can be overpowering or irritate those with allergies. Instead, bake a loaf of bread or cookies before the party (or warm up store-bought varieties in the oven), simmer spices on the stove or use fresh cut greenery in your décor. These provide subtle, yet comforting scents to set the mood.
- 7) **Anything goes:** Holiday parties don't have to be strictly poinsettias and Santa Claus, as long as they are enjoyable. Choose any theme or level of formality and let the style of your invitation be the guide for guests.
- 8) **Don't be intimidated:** Think your home isn't up to par for entertaining this season? Remember, it's the people, not the party's location that matters. Once guests are inside your home, they won't be worried about carpet stains or dust; they will be focused on laughing and creating memories with the people they love.

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